(IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE(S)

A conference on design, culture and technology
- past, present and future

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(IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE(S): Design, culture and technology – past, present, and future

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INTRODUCTION

(IN)TANGIBLE HERITAGE(S): Design, culture and technology – past, present, and future

The buildings, towns and cities we inhabit are physical entities created in the past, experienced in the present, and projected to inform the future. The same can be said of the artefacts we use daily: designed furniture in the home, the mobile devices in our hands, the vehicles we see on our streets. However, each of these places, buildings and products had, at their inception, social and cultural roles beyond their 'object' status. They continue to have them today. What we understand a designed object to be then, is a complex question of material and social import, and an intricate play of the tangible and intangible identities. Increasingly, it is also a question of hybrid experiences and overlaid histories. This conference addresses the range of issues connected to this scenario.

The complexity described above is even more pronounced in the case of digital artefacts and experiences such as computational design, VR simulations of ancient buildings, mobile apps, digital photography or virtual exhibitions. Intangible at the very moment of their inception, such designed artifacts not only blur the difference between the object and the experience, but, increasingly, the past and the present. Computer generated imagery creates 'life like' reconstructions of historic sites. Laser scanning gives archeologists glimpses of pasts erased long ago. Computational design gives designers instant recordings of their work in progress. Coupled with digital cataloguing, it gives us the instant asynchronous design archive.

Considered in this context it is not surprising that recently questions about the nature of heritage and design have opened up to redefinitions of the tangible and the intangible. In responding to this scenario the work of the authors collected in this publication present a diverse range of perspectives from various fields including art, architecture, design and cultural studies, to name but a few. They present reconsiderations of 'heritage' as both a tangible and an intangible concept and overlay our notions of the digital, on ideas of heritage and concepts of physicality and the present.

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DIGITAL STORYTELLING FORMATS FOR THE COMMUNICATION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN RURAL AND MARGINAL TERRITORIES: THE CASE OF THE "QUATTRO PROVINCE" AREA

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INTRODUCTION

Despite most people's perception of urban reality, cities occupy only about two percent of the landmass. All the remainder is thus comprised of rural areas, countryside, forests, or wilderness. Nevertheless, trends indicate a steady increase in concentration toward cities, with estimates suggesting that 68% of the world's population will live in large cities by 2050[1]. Rural realities, on the contrary, are destined to an ever-increasing abandonment process, facilitated partly by technological and agricultural developments that threaten the role of suburban areas within the global economic system.

The situation of the Italian territory, which is the focus of this research, is significant in this regard. Inner areas cover 54% of the national surface area, and two-thirds of Italian municipalities are classifiable as 'small municipalities'. However, such depopulation issues are still highly pronounced and are by no means new issues for internal areas. Since the second half of the 20th century, a significant portion of inland areas has undergone a process of marginalization that has manifested through very intense de-anthropization phenomena such as the reduction of the population below critical thresholds, demographic aging, and significant decreases in employment.

Ultimately, the severity of this process has also been evident in the gradual decline in the supply of those public, private and collective services that define the quality of citizenship. Today, with the extreme expansion of the center-periphery paradigm, every territory outside metropolitan cities is rapidly declining, leading struggling areas toward almost unavoidable demise. Although many of Italy's residents live in these remote territories (more than a quarter), issues regarding the development of these areas oscillate between political disinterest and temporary, non-systemic solutions that fail to address the underlying concerns.

Rural territories as collective heritage

From the point of view of cultural heritage, and especially from a conception of collective territorial heritage, it is remarkable to think that, as far as productive peculiarities are concerned, small municipalities are the center of the kind of cultural heritage famously expressed by typical products: in the case of Italy's 290 certified territorial typical products, 273 are, in fact, linked to the identity of small municipalities.[2]

In Italy, one of the first acknowledgments of this kind of heritage emerged in the early 1960s[3] when, in the context of a discussion on urban expansion, a nationwide debate related to the heritage of Italian suburban territories was included, with the aim of recognizing a wide range of anthropic and natural resources that make up an extensive system of historical-artistic centers within the national context.

From this point of view, the territory does not represent a closed entity. On the contrary, it combines physical spaces with their relational and social dimensions,[4] determined both by human presence on the territory and by lifestyles in today's society.[5] Viewed as a space capable of hosting and collecting skills, knowledge, culture, material goods, and historical and environmental heritage, the territory has the potential to become a vehicle of knowledge capable of creating innovation at the local level. An engine that can provide the infrastructure necessary for facilitating the flow of ideas and related creative processes.[6]

Intangible assets for marginal territories

In this context, territorial traditions constitute in every respect a heritage closely intertwined with the environmental and historical context in which they arise and are transmitted. They represent concrete symbolic objects and expressions that embody and transmit meanings in various tangible and intangible forms; they are a "shared significance embodied in form. […] a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated. [they] tell a story, and that story may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body".[7] In this context, the greatest threat to folk traditions, even those that have stood the test of time, is the loss of their forms of meaning.

Even when recorded through modern documentation techniques, visual documentation of cultural and traditional expressions is not always enough to ensure the communication of those connotative traits typical of every folk tradition. The essence of culture is difficult to convey only through video or photographic recordings, and tools can only help to give an idea of the atmosphere and context in which a particular song or dance is immersed. These considerations seem at odds with the intent of documenting and narrating traditional heritage in order to make it known to other interested people who are geographically distant: does it make sense to document what, by its nature, is intangible and lives only in terms of experiences?

METHODS

Building on the analysis of the evidence and speculations expressed in the previous sections, the need for a revitalization of fragile territories emerges with the objective of allowing them to adapt to the unstoppable technological progress while still being able to preserve their identities. This is the context in which this research is positioned: the goal is to use the tools of Communication Design to connect the features and benefits of interactive digital media with the need for a greater awareness of marginal and fragile realities, with the aim to overcome the barriers imposed by physical proximity. Greater awareness and consequently a more appropriate representation of those suburban areas that, despite presenting a rich and varied cultural heritage, are often overlooked when considering the social and economic system of the national territory.

In this scenario, the design work has been effectively directed toward the exploration of new ways of investigating, by digital means, those territories that are both marginalized and unreachable, not only on a physical level but also because they are distant from the cognitive awareness of the vast majority of citizens. To support this intent, the research focuses on visualization and interaction patterns that, by harnessing digital media, are also able to create an emotional reaction in the reader.

Context of application

In order to develop such experiments in immersive digital storytelling, a very significant though little-known area of application has been selected: the "Quattro Province" area (Four Provinces) is a group of mountains and valleys identified within the first northern section of the Apennines and shared between four provinces of four different regions: Genoa (Liguria), Alessandria (Piedmont), Pavia (Lombardy) and Piacenza (Emilia Romagna). The distinctiveness of these lands, in addition to their particular political arrangement, lies in their cultural homogeneity, as people have lived in somewhat similar ways for hundreds of years. The heart of this unity is evidenced and represented above all by traditional folk music, which as early as the 1970s was described by the first ethnomusicological researchers as "Quattro Province" folk music.

From a historiographical point of view, due to the scarcity of documentation regarding typical everyday objects, the object of the study belongs not so much to the main historical narratives but is rather more adequately described by the approach proposed by "microhistory",[8] i.e., the branch of social history focused on the value of regional or local cultures, closely associated with social and cultural history.[9] Accounts of everyday situations and anecdotes hidden deep in people's memories have contributed largely to the writing of research on folk music. While most records are limited to oral recollections of a few specific musicians, tales that can be dated back to the early nineteenth century are still handed down by the few remaining village elders.

RESULTS

Working with this research framework, the first step in the outreach process was to contact local residents and associations dedicated to the Quattro Province area and its traditional musical heritage. Based on an initial connection with some informed counterparts, it was subsequently possible to establish a dialogue with researchers, musicians, local producers, performers of traditional folk dances, artists and singers who provided information and tales, references and bibliographies. These sources made it possible to identify the critical plot components of the digital narrative and references to historical materials and quotations related to the context of traditional music.

In addition to interviews with the protagonists of the music scene, the historical research relied heavily on the online source "Dove comincia l'Appennino",[10] a collective effort entirely dedicated to the territorial knowledge of the Quattro Province with the aim to collect and disseminate information on music and local cultures. Besides this, bibliographic sources such as the book "Coi nostri strumenti",[11] which delves into the history and personalities involved in the musical traditions of the Quattro Province, and other digital archives, such as "Lombardia Digital Archive"[12] or the "Baghet" website,[13] were also consulted to collect archival materials and visual documentation. As for first-hand knowledge in the field, the fieldwork of exploration and familiarization proved valuable in allowing us to interpret the themes of the narrative through the notions learned from the local experts.

Narrative structure and visual language

Building on these materials, by analyzing the various connections and relationships that exist in the territory, the research focused on designing a digital storytelling format capable of framing both the history of the area and its current perspectives. As a storytelling format, the project was developed exclusively on digital media in order to provide a narrative mode able to exploit visual, audio, and video content in combination with textual commentary able to give them the necessary context for interpretation.

The model, from an editorial point of view, comes from long-form journalism, a digital communication format that, through the interaction between text and rich multimedia content, is able

to build a rich reading experience in which different types of content are effectively conveyed by combining them into a pleasing reading experience.
In terms of the expressive concept, the reading experience replicates a kind of “digital attic” where historical materials are imagined as emerging from conceptual dust. In line with this concept, a noisy bichromatic effect applied to the visual content (also instrumental in equalizing the different qualities and hues found among the archival materials), the choice of a contemporary color palette muted by a slightly retro filter, and a mixed typographic selection, have tried to emphasize the dimension of a contemporary reinterpretation of historical contents, which are rediscovered through digital means.
Starting from the aforementioned raw materials and the visual and narrative concept, the design activity later focused on the design of a digital storytelling structure made up of autonomous sections, developed with the explicit aim of expressing the unique kind of content related to the examined territory.

Homepage

The main function of the homepage is to introduce the topic of the narrative. The visual effects applied to the title introduce the themes of discovery and digital “dusting off” of the Quattro Province heritage. The screen shows a short introductory paragraph and a summary where the different sections of the story are listed to introduce the story’s themes and structure.

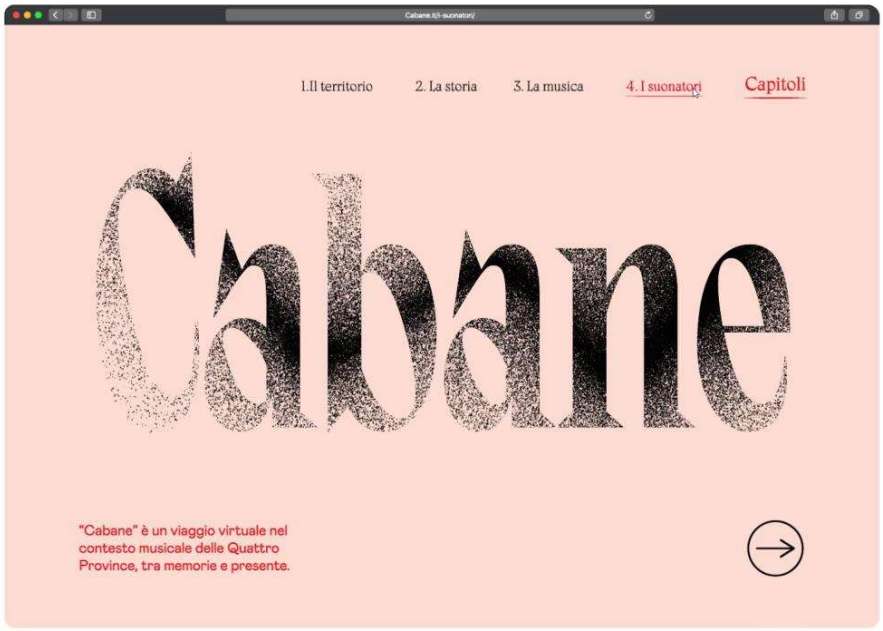

Figure 1. Project Homepage

Territory

The first section marks the actual virtual access to the territory of the Quattro Province: in order to best introduce the research context, the user is shown an illustrated map of the valleys and mountains that compose the region. The purpose of this first screen, and of the section in general, is to be able to provide a closer look at the geographical features and spatial distribution of natural elements.
A button in the upper portion of the map allows the user to view the surrounding environment in two or three dimensions to depict the territory’s morphology as accurately as possible. Next, a second screen consisting of a photo gallery shifts the territorial narrative to a more candid look that visually

describes the area. The section ends with an interview with a local, who shares a personal interpretation of the territory.

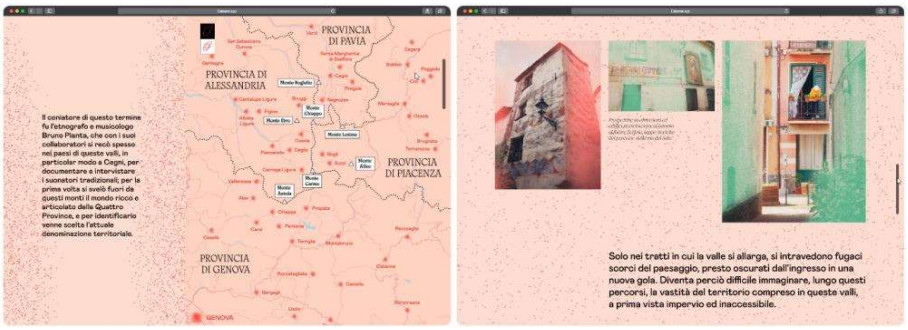

Figure 2. Screenshots from the "territory" section

History

The second section of the project focuses on the most fundamental historical notes related to the Quattro Province area, including the origins of its traditional instruments. For this reason, after the introductory cover page, the user interacts with a map that displays two ancient trade routes overlaid on top of the current territory and some of the main milestones. A chronological narrative then unfolds, consisting of paragraphs of text, dialect quotations, and images that show the most iconic paintings depicting traditional musicians in the area. The purpose of this section is to reveal some of the evidence that can be useful in understanding how deeply rooted these folk traditions are in the cultural milieu of the area.

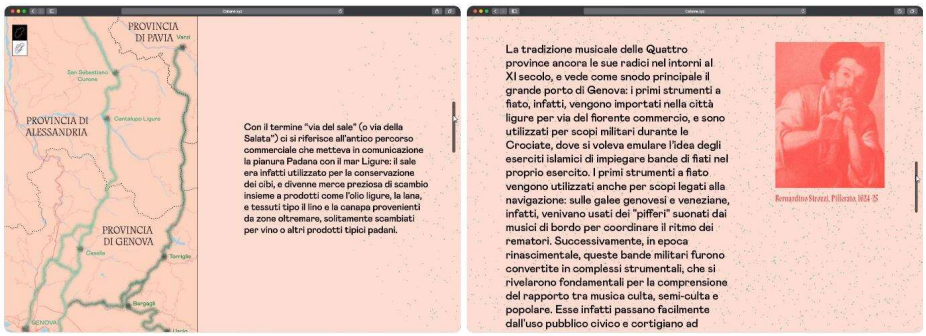

Figure 3. Screenshots from the "history" section

Instruments

The third section is focused on traditional musical instruments. While opening with an introductory cover, the section then follows with a summary of the instrument's history, consisting of text, two-color photographs, and local quotations. The intention is to offer the best possible presentation of fife, muse, and accordion to provide the reader with the relevant artisanal context.

On a second screen, technical sheets built around faithful illustrations of the instruments and complemented by in-depth explanations related to the musical instruments' different parts are introduced with the aim to describe the instrument and honor the local craftsmanship.

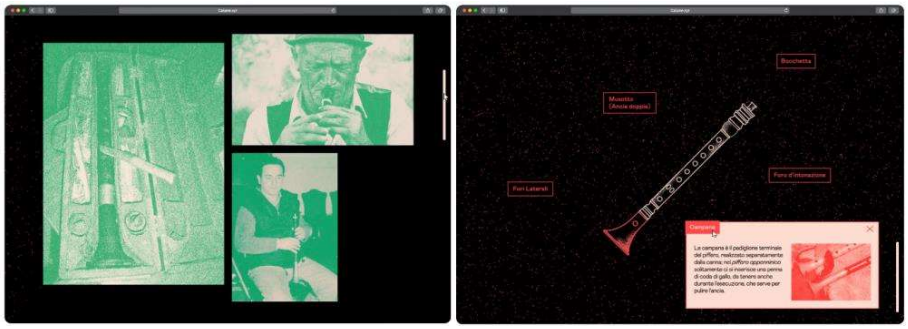

Figure 4. Screenshots from the "instruments" section

Players

In the fourth and final section, the subject of the narrative shifts to the local protagonists, namely the folk musicians. They represent the connection that still persists today between the different valleys of the Quattro Province, bound together by the melodies of village festivals. Specifically, the section consists of two different timelines, relating to historical musicians (who lived at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries) and modern musicians (born in the second half of the 20th century). Beyond presenting the time sequence of events, these timelines are also meant to acknowledge the most significant individuals who have shaped the history of local traditional music.

Figure 5. Screenshots from the "players" section

CONCLUSION

This research stems from the desire to experiment with a digital format capable of responding to the need for a more substantial and widespread awareness of those marginalized contexts that, despite presenting a rich and varied cultural heritage, often remain forgotten in studies related to social and economic systems.

From a content standpoint, due to the richness of the territory and to the limited freedom of movement allowed during the research period (corresponding with the Covid19 pandemic), the cultural and musical heritage taken into consideration during the research does not cover the entire traditional knowledge of the Quattro Province. In fact, this research provides a first prototype, to be further expanded, focused mainly on the provinces of Alessandria and Pavia, which were more easily accessible and presented stronger connections with the local community.

Also due to the epidemic, it was not possible to document the actual venues for traditional music, namely folk festivals and fairs, which were postponed due to travel restrictions. The project, built on previous experiences with interactive long-form storytelling, experiments with formats for describing intangible cultural assets related to fragile territories and minor histories, which are often neglected

and rarely find adequate ways to express their potential. Rich storytelling formats can help convey the complex nature of cultural territories and intangible heritages, and the prototype designed for the Quattro Provincie area can be used in different contexts characterized by similar types of contents and materials. The narrative structure, based on the use of modules with varying roles in the overall narrative, can be expanded to include different types of content and experiences, depending on the specific needs of the context to be described.

NOTES

[1] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, and Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*, 2019.
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